

Researchers find startling numbers of active-military personnel engaging in frequent binge drinking

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Binge drinking is common among active-duty military personnel and is strongly associated with many health and social problems, including problems with job performance and alcohol-impaired driving, according to a new study released by the University of Minnesota and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The study analyzed data from 16,037 active-duty military personnel who participated in a 2005 Department of Defense Survey of Health-Related Behaviors among Military Personnel. Binge drinking is defined as consuming four or more drinks on one occasion for a woman or five or more drinks on one occasion for a man. It was reported by 43 percent of active-duty personnel during the past-month, resulting in a total of approximately 30 million episodes of binge drinking or roughly 30 episodes per person per year. About two-thirds of these episodes were reported by active-duty personnel who were 17 to 25 years of age at the time of the survey, including 5 million episodes that were reported by active-duty personnel who were under 21 years of age.

The researchers also found that alcohol-related problems were reported by more than half of all active-duty personnel who reported binge drinking, and that compared to non-binge drinkers, binge drinkers were more than six times more likely to report job performance problems and about five times more likely to report driving after having too much to drink.

"Our study clearly shows that binge drinking is a significant public health problem in the military, which is dangerous to both the drinkers and to those around them," said Mandy Stahre, M.P.H., a doctoral candidate in alcohol epidemiology and first author of the study. "It also underscores the importance of implementing effective strategies to prevent underage and binge drinking, such as maintaining and enforcing the age 21 minimum legal drinking age and increasing alcohol excise taxes."

Although the data was collected in 2005, researchers note that the problem of binge drinking among active-duty personnel has been documented over the past 20 years. As with all self-reported surveys, binge drinking and related consequences are generally underreported, thus the estimates of the prevalence and frequency of binge drinking among active-duty personnel may be conservative.

"This study provides further evidence that binge drinking is a major public health problem in the U.S.," noted Robert Brewer, M.D., the leader of the CDC's Alcohol Program and co-author. "However, the military may be in a unique position to help reduce this problem in the general population, particularly given that nearly 13 percent of U.S. adults report current or past military service."

Source: University of Minnesota

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